

Laudatio for Sarah Blaffer Hrdy

29 January 2009, University for Humanistics, Utrecht
prof. dr. P. Derkx



Dear Dr. Sarah Blaffer Hrdy,

It is a great honor for me to explain to you and everybody present at this solemn occasion why the Council of Professors of the University for Humanistics has decided to bestow an honorary doctorate upon you.

Let me first say that I take it for granted that everybody accepts that your scientific and scholarly work is of the highest quality. Your election to the US National Academy of Sciences in 1990 and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1992 can serve as a short and sufficient indication. This is not to say that scientific quality is unimportant, but rather that it is a *conditio sine qua non* for this honorary degree. The University for Humanistics has more specific reasons for conferring it on you. I will mention the three most important ones.

Your book entitled *The Langurs of Abu: Female and Male Strategies of Reproduction*, published in 1977, might still be regarded as a study in the discipline of primatology or biological anthropology. But the books that followed are clearly multi-, inter- or transdisciplinary. Your book of 1999 called *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection* draws on evolutionary biology, physiology, psychology, primatology, cultural anthropology, history, the novels of George Eliot and everything else that you think relevant and enlightening for your topic of investigation: what makes a good mother? It is interesting that your work also raises questions about disciplinary boundaries. Your remark that adoptive parents are not genetic parents but certainly are biological parents, raises questions about the nature of biology. We at the University for Humanistics understand very well how necessary and difficult it is to engage in multidisciplinary research. Humanistics is a multidisciplinary field of study combining humanities and social sciences (psychology included). We are glad to honor your work as an excellent and highly readable example of **multidisciplinary scholarship**, the more so because it makes abundantly clear that humanist research also has to take into account the results of and the discussions in primatology and evolutionary biology.

The second reason for your honorary doctorate is the way your scientific work is guided by **feminist perspectives and values**. By feminism I do not mean a social movement fighting for women against men. Feminism is a humanist movement fighting for justice and for a society in which men and women – given all the differences between the sexes and between human individuals – are treated as equals. You have been clear about your conviction that female scientists are different from male colleagues not because they use a different scientific method

but because they ask different questions. Your research deals with infanticide, female sexuality, attachment and bonding, maternal love and the ambiguities of motherhood, alloparents and cooperative breeding, the sociocognitive and emotional development of infants and thus human beings, and with the past, present, and future of the human family. All of this research is relevant for the quality of the lives of men, women and children. That these topics have a strong connection with your own personal life experiences has not made your publications less convincing. An important male colleague early in your career suggested to your dismay that you had better give up science and devote more time to raising your child. This conflict, and I noticed there have been many more, will have strengthened your motivation to find objective answers to questions relevant for feminism. The answers you have come up with in your synthetic studies are impressive and stimulate further research. And in the process you have shown that evolutionary biology and feminism need not be enemies but can be allies.

The third reason why you deserve this honorary degree is the crucial importance of your research topics for the two central themes of humanistics: **meanings of life and humanization of relationships, organizations and society**. I think that many who have read your book *Mother Nature* will experience it as a very rich and powerful argument for the importance of good child care facilities. At the same time the book clarifies several key factors in what makes an individual human life meaningful: survival, death, hope, sex, children and love, to give the shortest summary. Moreover, reading your latest book up to now has what one might call a 'meaningful' effect. One hundred and fifty years after Darwin we can still say that there is not only explanatory power but also *gràndeur* in the very long term evolutionary perspective connecting us humans with our ancestors, other animals and our ever changing environment.

So for these and other reasons it is a great pleasure for me to have the privilege of conferring this honorary doctorate in humanistics on you.